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Turner Tells Of New Era Of CIA Openness During Visit Here

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Adm. Stansfield Turner, director of Central Intelligence and head of the Central Intelligence Agency, visited here yesterday with a message that the supersecret CIA is entering a new era of openness.

"As little as five to eight years ago, this talk probably would not have taken place," he told 650 people at a joint luncheon meeting of the San Diego Kiwanis Club and the Chamber of Commerce. "Since then, the events of Vietnam and Watergate have virtually propelled intelligence gathering into the headlines."

That those headlines were usually negative when Turner took control of the CIA in March 1977 has meant a regular schedule of travel and speaking engagements in search of public support, something he asked for yesterday.

When Turner steamed into the CIA last year, he carried with him clear orders from President Carter, his boss and former Naval Academy classmate, to strip some of the cloaks, daggers and confusion from U.S. intelligence operations.

As part of his mission, he said he now speaks to about six public groups a month and publishes papers previously considered classified.

"When asked questions by the press and the public, we still have to say 'no comment' at times," Turner said, "but our needle is not stuck in that groove any more."

Turner briefly acknowledged the weight of public and congressional criticism over the agency's covert operations hurt the CIA in the mid-1970s. "The past secrecy meant that there was no way for the American public to balance past achievements of the intelligence community with alleged abuses," Turner said. "So by being more open today, we hope that we are generating a new sense of support, a sense of understanding."

On Jan. 24, Turner's intelligence role was greatly expanded when Mr. Carter appointed him director of Central Intelligence. The new title gave Turner control over government spending on foreign espionage activities by all U.S. intelligence agencies — the CIA, which he heads, as well as the Defense Intelligence Agency and other agencies.

"The President's executive order of January also put me in charge of tasking all the various intelligence agencies, telling them what information they are to collect," Turner told an earlier meeting of The San Diego Union's editorial board. "But he was very careful. He did not put me in charge of interpretation of the analysis of the information collected. We want those competing views to come forward."

Turner praised the system of checks and balances set up to monitor CIA activities, a system that includes, besides the President and vice president, two congressional oversight boards and a three-man Intelligence Oversight Board.

But, while saying that the possibility of abuses in covert operations was slim, he said such review boards add to the ever-present danger of intelligence leaks.

"How far am I willing to go to risk a source in order to be forthright with the committees?" Turner said. "I try to bend as far as I can and so far I think it's worked out well. But at some point my conscience hits me and I have to say that I am required by law to protect our secret sources."

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Turner warned of what he called the "very real danger presented by former agents who, for some reason or another, decide to write books and tell all. The unauthorized disclosure of secrets is something that really bothers me today."

Former CIA agent Philip Agee purports to have named 250 CIA agents and threatens to list the names of another 700 in a new book. Former CIA agent Frank Snepp recently published a book critical of CIA behavior during the final days of the Vietnam war.

(Agee now lives outside the U.S. Snepp was recently ordered by a judge to turn over all profits from his book, "Decent Interval," for having violated his CIA contract to allow the agency to review the book before publication.)

While Turner says that radically changing world politics have meant massive changes in the agency's responsibilities, one staple of his business — the classic spy, or, as Turner called it, "the human agent" — is still necessary.

"Data gained through technological means usually tells us what happened yesterday," Turner said. "Agents are necessary to tell us why it happened and what may happen tomorrow."

Giving the CIA healthy praise, Turner said his new policy of openness (which did not include disclosing anything yesterday not previously printed), means "living in a fishbowl."

But he added that the CIA will continue to be "the most effective intelligence gathering force in the world ... not despite its openness, but because of it."

Greg Chamber of Commerce

Greg Kiwanis Club